



MSDE BULLETIN

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BOARD LAUNCHES REGULATORY PROCESS TO STRENGTHEN HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

The Maryland State Board of Education this week agreed to begin the process of developing regulations that would require high school students to pass the four High School Assessments before receiving a Maryland High School Diploma.

The multi-faceted concept also would provide other pathways to high school completion, including a local high school diploma, a diploma for certain students with learning disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and a certificate of program completion. Assessment passage would not be the sole criteria for graduation, however, as other high school completion requirements that are currently in place – such as successful completion of coursework and service-learning work – would remain.

The State Board launched the regulatory process on a 9-2 vote, but the concept has a long way to go before final approval.

MSDE staff will begin preparing draft regulatory changes for the new high school graduation requirements for the State Board's consideration in February. Once presented with the draft regulations, the State Board would then vote to publish the draft for public comment and a public hearing. A final vote to enact the new regulations would not occur before May of 2004.

"The State Board has sent a clear message that it cares about strengthening standards for Maryland students," said State Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick. "This is just the first step in a process that will involve all of our stakeholders – educators, parents, students, higher education, and the economic development community."

Dr. Grasmick and members of the State Board agreed that they would rethink the regulatory proposal if financial support for the Bridge to Excellence Act funding mandates that grew out of the Thornton Commission is not continued.

The High School Assessments, introduced in 2002, are tests in algebra/data analysis, biology, English I, and government. These are typically freshman and sophomore-level courses.

Maryland has moved cautiously to strengthen graduation

requirements, having studied instituting such a step since 1993. The state's Core Learning Goals, upon which the assessments are based, have been in place since 1996. All local school systems have certified that the Goals are fully integrated into the curriculum and instruction, which means that appropriate courses have been in place in Maryland classrooms for seven years. If the State Board ultimately approves the regulatory change for the class of 2009, 16 years will have passed between initial consideration of a High School Assessment Program and the first graduating class to be affected by it.

The proposed framework for the new graduation regulations is not expected to adversely affect Maryland's graduation rate or dropout rate. Since students begin taking the exams in their freshman year, if not earlier, they would have 10 chances or more to pass each one. Moreover, if a student were to fail an assessment, he or she would receive appropriate academic interventions based on a system of formative assessment tools that will be used to diagnose problem areas.

The proposal discussed by the State Board provides several routes to high school completion. They are:

- **Maryland High School Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and pass all four High School Assessments or substitute tests – such as the Advanced Placement or SAT II tests – that are aligned with the High School Assessments and are approved by the state. He or she also would be required to complete the other graduation requirements, such as service-learning, and local and state required credits and coursework.
- **Local High School Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school, pass three of the four assessments, and complete the other requirements.
- **Local High School IEP Diploma** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The student must take all High School Assessments, although there is no requirement that he or she pass them. In addition, the student must complete all other state and local requirements and complete all IEP requirements. The student will receive an exit document that describes his or her skills.
- **Certificate of Program Achievement** – A student must be enrolled in a Maryland high school and have an IEP. The student must take Alt-MSA (Alternative Maryland School Assessments) or High School Assessments, depending upon the IEP determination. The IEP Team will determine a student's eligibility for the certificate. These students also will receive an exit document that describes their skills.

Dr. Grasmick emphasized that the proposal assures that all students would have opportunities for success as standards are

(more)

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being raised to keep Maryland classrooms on pace to meet the requirements of both the workplace and higher education.

“We will set in place a variety of safeguards for students as they move through the academic process,” she explained. “Teachers would continue to be provided with tools and professional development to help them identify struggling students as early as possible. Those students having difficulty would be given the assistance they need and deserve.”

As part of the process, Maryland is developing a series of on-line courses in each of the four subject areas that students will be able to access at no cost.

The decision to begin the regulatory process came after lengthy debate over the two-day State Board meeting.

Kati Haycock, executive director of Education Trust, a Washington, DC-based advocacy group, told State Board members that high school assessments are only effective tools if they count. That is when students, teachers and policymakers take them seriously, she explained.

International studies indicate that student achievement at U.S. high schools consistently lags behind that at secondary schools in other nations, and the gap in this country between students from high and low socio-economic groups is among the greatest in the world.

“The diploma that we are providing them does not represent the level of skill these students need to be successful,” Haycock explained.

Several advocates for learning disabled children testified against the proposal, claiming that different diploma levels would unfairly brand some students as less capable than others and could keep some kids out of college or the workforce.

However, a number of the advocates said that if the High School Assessment is added to the graduation requirements, there should be differentiated paths to a diploma to allow students with special difficulty in test taking to graduate.

Other speakers gave impassioned pleas for a stronger diploma. June Streckfus, executive director of the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education, said that the State Board needed to focus on what was most important for students.

“The question should not be, ‘What if a student doesn’t get a diploma,’” she said. “The question should be, ‘What if a student doesn’t get an education.’”

Sylvester McKay, president of Baltimore City Community College, said a series of high school exit exams is one way that

the state can help students know what is required after high school. The current system, without the graduation test, has led to high rates of remedial education at the postsecondary level. ■

STATE BOARD GIVES APPROVAL TO LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEM MASTER PLANS

The State Board this week approved 22 of 24 local Master Plans, which were required under the Bridge to Excellence Act.

The law, which encompassed the Thornton Commission recommendations, required that local school systems submit five-year Master Plans, which were to include goals and strategies to promote academic excellence among all students and eliminate performance gaps that exist between certain groups of students.

Only Dorchester County, which will revise its Master Plan by the end of the year, and Baltimore City, which will present a plan in January, have not completed this process.

JoAnne Carter, Assistant State Superintendent for Student and School Services, said that local systems came into the process fully prepared, and that MSDE staff will be working with systems to provide assistance as the plans are implemented.

Each system developed detailed documents in different ways and included different features. For example, Harford County put together its plan after an exhaustive series of public meetings and engagements with stakeholders as part of its process. Allegany County put in place a systemic approach to plan for oversight.

State Board President Ed Root said the Master Plan process has been valuable.

“The time and effort that went into this is overwhelming,” he noted. “The results are tremendous.” ■

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